



**THARWA VALLEY FORGE**  
**AUSTRALIAN·BLADESMITHING·SCHOOL**

VETERANS AND FAMILIES MAKER PROGRAM



### *Summary of Results*

## **Crafting Something Superlative: Evaluation of a Maker Program for Contemporary Australian Veterans**

### **Introduction**

Thank you for participating in the study, “Crafting something superlative: Evaluation of a maker program for contemporary Australian veterans”. The aim of this study was to explore the effects of Tharwa Valley Forge’s Veterans and Families Maker Program on the psychosocial well-being of contemporary Australian veterans and their family members, and to gain insight into veterans’ experiences of, and needs in, transition.

Previous research has suggested that transition can be a significant and stressful period, with veterans reporting challenges in a number of domains, including a reduced sense of agency, poorer quality of life, interpersonal conflict, and physical and mental health difficulties. An emphasis on challenges means that we know less about what success and well-being in transition look like, and how we might best support veterans in readjusting to civilian life. Transition appears to be influenced by individual factors (e.g., coping styles, attitudes), social support (friends and family), military transition management (DVA and ADF services), and community civilian support (e.g., ex-service organisations, community groups). While a number of programs exist in Australia to support the well-being of veterans, delivered by both DVA and community-based organisations, there has been little evaluation of how these programs work.

### **Participants**

A total of 69 contemporary veterans and family members took part in the Veterans and Families Maker Program between January and June of 2018. Pre- and post-program survey responses were available for 42 participants, and follow-up surveys were returned by 27 participants. 15 participants took part in a focus group at the forge in August 2018.

Responses to the demographic questions indicate that the participants in this study were similar to the contemporary veteran cohort. 79% had been deployed on operations, 76% had spent significant time separated from family, and 17% had been medically discharged. Service had adversely affected 41% of veterans and 38% of families. 33% of participants were former ADF personnel, 55% were current ADF personnel, and 12% were family members. The average age was 39 years, and most participants were men (90%).

## **Well-Being and Program Outcomes**

Participants in this study completed questionnaires that included items about quality of life, self-efficacy, sense of identity, engagement with hobbies, and program satisfaction. From the beginning of the program to 3-month follow-up, engagement with hobbies increased, suggesting that creative pursuits played a greater role in participants' lives after the program. There was no significant change in general quality of life, psychological quality of life, sense of identity, or self-efficacy, with moderate scores on these outcomes at both time points. Quantitative data indicated that social quality of life declined over time, though focus group responses suggested otherwise.

Four themes emerged from the focus group: program engagement, change processes, outcomes, and future hopes. Participants spoke about their reasons for engaging with the program, particularly family reconnection, and how an activity-based program was more appealing than direct social engagement. They also spoke of the supportive and challenging environment, which offered them a new perspective and renewed their sense of creativity. Working alongside other veterans was particularly valuable, as was building community, and veterans felt that their handmade tools could serve as a conversation starter in connecting with new people. Participants knives and tools were a source of personal pride, and a reminder of family, purpose, meaning, and mental wellness. While many had taken up crafting in a more serious way after the course, they also expressed hopes that future programs could be developed, offering ongoing support and opportunities for community building and family reconnection.

## **Conclusions**

Globally, few evaluations of programs designed to promote well-being in contemporary veterans have been conducted. The results of this pilot program were promising, and this study contributes to a growing field of research exploring the transition from military service to civilian life. These results might inform future programs and interventions, and demonstrate impact and value to stakeholders and policy makers. Australian veterans need to be supported by both the government, and by their community, and this support needs to be built upon a strong foundation of research considering acceptability, efficacy, and feasibility. Most importantly, support must be aligned with veterans' own needs, experiences, and desired outcomes, and transition must be considered an ongoing and multi-faceted process.